INVOLVEMENT LOAD IN TRANSLATION TASKS AND EFL VOCABULARY LEARNING

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Abstract

This study mainly examined the effects of three translation tasks on vocabulary learning for tertiary-level learners based on the motivational-cognitive constructs of task-induced involvement load, as suggested in the Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH) (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Sixty low-proficiency level students were randomly assigned to three groups to complete one of three translation tasks that varied in the amount of involvement load: Task 1, translation-only mode (one involvement load), translation plus fill-in exercises (two involvement load), and translation plus sentence writing (three involvement load). Three-modality vocabulary knowledge of recognizing word form, recalling meaning, and producing word knowledge were measured immediately after study and two months after study. The results of the study were in line with the claims of ILH that word learning and retention in a second language are contingent upon a task’s involvement load. In the current study, word learning and retention was highest in Task 3, followed by Task 2, and Task 1. These and relevant pedagogical implications were discussed.

Key words: task, vocabulary learning, Involvement Load Hypothesis, vocabulary gain

Introduction

Students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acknowledge the mastery of vocabularies in English is a priority. This is not really surprising since the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are all associated with a propitious command of vocabulary, and the proficiency level of vocabulary determines the practical ability of applying these four language skills in EFL contexts. No matter how
proficient a learner is in grammar or phonology, any meaningful communication shall not happen without vocabulary (Laufer, 1993; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). It is the basic unit of language learning. Hence, how to improve students’ vocabulary gain is one of the key goals in EFL teaching.

The application and effects of tasks in EFL vocabulary teaching and learning have been supported by many researchers. One of the hottest issues in vocabulary research is the use of the task of reading on vocabulary learning. A variety of studies exploring the effects of reading tasks on vocabulary learning have been conducted by many researchers (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012; Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001; Nation, 2013). The common feature of these studies is the evidence that the reading tasks facilitate learners' vocabulary gain and direct instruction, especially the elaborate instruction in word processing, facilitates vocabulary learning. Listening tasks were also conducted to measure the incidental vocabulary learning (Van Zealand & Schmitt, 2013; Vidal 2003). They prominently pointed out that listening tasks help facilitate vocabulary learning. The effects of speaking tasks on vocabulary learning have also been illustrated by using negotiation tasks (Newton, 2013), which confirmed that negotiated interaction has a positive effect on vocabulary learning. Some researchers (Folse, 2006; Lee, 2003; Muncie, 2002; Webb, 2005) have pointed out the more facilitative and potential power of writing tasks on facilitating vocabulary learning by comparing them with other speaking or reading tasks. As of now, few researchers have specifically addressed the effects of translation task on vocabulary learning (Hummel, 2010), which is the main purpose of the current study.

In measuring task effectiveness, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) proposed the Involvement Load Hypothesis, which states that incidental vocabulary learning and retention is contingent on three constructs: need, search, and evaluation. Tasks with higher degrees of need, search, and evaluation are more effective for incidental word learning than tasks with lower load. The present study aims to expand our existing knowledge of task-induced involvement, and measure its effects on three-modality word knowledge through translation tasks.
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**Literature Review**

*The Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH)*

Craik and Lockhart (1972) firstly proposed the theory of depth and levels of processing in the research on human memory. According to their theory, a deeper level of processing is related to more detailed, meaningful, durable, and stronger memories. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) used this theory as basis and proposed the motivational-cognitive constructs of task-induced involvement, which states that vocabulary items are best learnt in a condition requiring a high involvement load.

*Need, search and evaluation* are the three constructs of task-induced involvement. *Need* is a motivational but non-cognitive dimension of involvement, and is differentiated as strong *need* (+) (intrinsic need) and moderate *need* (-) (extrinsic need). Put succinctly, A need is strong when it is self-motivated (e.g., a learner wishes to learn for what he/she lack) and moderate when the task is imposed by extrinsic factors (e.g., teachers). *Search* and *evaluation* are the two cognitive dimensions of involvement. *Search* is the process to locate the meaning of an unknown word, e.g., using a dictionary to ascertain the explanation of unknown words. *Evaluation* refers to the comparison of a new word with other words and measurement of its suitability in a given context. *Evaluation* is strong (++) when a task requires the learners to combine new words and known words in an original context (e.g., to create a sentence or write a composition) and moderate (+) when a task only requires the learners to recognize differences between words provided in a given context (e.g., make a decision that which meaning of the new word best fits the given context).

The three components do not always appear simultaneously during a reading task. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) proposed “Involvement Index” to define the depth of processing, in which the absence of a component is marked 0(-), the moderate presence of a component is marked 1(+), and the strong presence of a component is marked 2(++). According to ILH, tasks with higher indexes are deemed more effective for learning and retaining a word than those tasks with lower indexes.

The presence of this hypothesis provides a theoretical headway in the domain of vocabulary acquisition (Laufer, 2012), and the validity of this hypothesis was proved by examining five mediator variables: design quality, output tasks, time on tasks, genres of text, and word ratios (Huang, Eslami,
Empirical evidence for ILH

Empirical support for ILH is as follows:

In Keating’s (2008) study, word learning and retention for seventy-nine Spanish beginning English learners were found to be heavily dependent on a task’s involvement load. Significant differences were found in the three tasks: Reading comprehension (Task one, one involvement index), reading comprehension supplemented with target word suppliance (Task two, two involvement indexes), reading comprehension plus sentence writing (Task three, three involvement indexes). His study revealed that passive knowledge of the target words in Task three improved the most, followed by Task two, and Task one. Active knowledge of the target words in Task three also improved the most, followed by Task two, and Task one. His study revealed that vocabularies were best learnt in tasks with higher involvement load than tasks with lower involvement load, similar results could also be found in other studies (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012; Hill & Laufer, 2003; Huang, Eslami, & Willson 2012).

In Hummel’s (2010) study, 191 native French speakers were required to translate sentences from their first language (L1) to second language (L2) and from L2 to L1. Participants were randomly assigned to three tasks (Task 1, French to English active translation, n=71; Task 2, English to French, n=71; Task 3, exposure and copy exercise, n=49). Although his results showed that all three exercises produced short-term increases in vocabulary gains, the third task of exposure and copy exercise significantly outperformed the other two tasks. The results purported that vocabulary learning may not be facilitated as much by active translation as exposure and copy condition, however, other studies supported the use of translation (Folse, 2004). In addition, one thing that bears in mind for Hummel’s result is that his study only tests the short-term learning.

In Kim’s (2008) study, two experiments were carried out. In the first experiment, participants were required to take three vocabulary tasks with different levels of involvement index. In the second experiment, participants were required to take tasks with equal involvement load. The results revealed that word learning and retention were achieved better in the task with a higher involvement index. In addition, identical involvement load index in the two tasks showed similar results. The results were in line with Laufer &
Rozovski-Roitblat’s (2011) study, wherein participants who attended the task of reading a text plus Focus on Forms (word-focused) activities outperformed the participants who attended the task of reading a text with occasional Focus on Form (refer to a dictionary) in learning 60 test items during a 13-week course.

Limitations of prior research

Research on IHL conducted so far is limited in at least three ways: First, prior research has mainly been focused on involving advanced learners, who might have a more advanced ability in learning and deep interest in taking the tasks. It remains to be seen, whether EFL learners with a low-proficiency level in Asian context, also benefit from tasks with a high involvement load. Because learners with a low-proficiency level might have a lexical threshold to fully infer the meaning from the context. Second, few studies conducted to date has been focused on how the results would be in translation tasks. As Folse (2004) proposed, translations are not bad but a helpful tool in learning L2 vocabulary. The current study aims to probe into this issue. Third, the present study measures three-modality vocabulary knowledge: passive recognition, active recall, and free production, which represent passive and active vocabulary knowledge in terms of their relative levels of difficulty in learning vocabulary knowledge. This dimensions approach is what previous studies lack in researching the effects of task-induced involvement on EFL vocabulary learning.

Research Questions

Two related questions were addressed in the present study:

1. As Task 3 show higher involvement load of need, search and evaluation, could it be reasonably hypothesized that the result of vocabulary learning in Task 3 is better than Task2, followed by Task 1?

2. Based on the tenets of ILH, could it be reasonably hypothesized that Task 3, with the highest involvement load indexes, would lead to better retention of target words than Task2, followed by Task 1?
Methodology

Participants

The participants were native-Chinese speakers enrolled in two parallel classes of business English at Nanning University. They learn English as a foreign language and regard English as a tool for assisting their study of business, and they had no studying experiences abroad. They ranged in age from 19 to 21. They were all from Guangxi Province, which meant they shared mostly the same background in learning English.

Initially, there were 102 students from these two parallel classes, only 60 students were selected based on the following criterion: All participants must have similar proficiency in mastering the 2,000 frequently used words. Vocabulary levels test (VLT) developed by Schmitt, Schmitt and Clapham (2001) was used. Information of validation was showed in Nation and Gu (2007), and this test was successfully applied in Peters (2014). The average score of the selected students in the current study was 21.74 out of 30 (The 2,000 word level). The validity of comparing these two groups was guaranteed since their average scores on VLT did not differ significantly (Group 1: 22.35 out of 30, Group 2: 21.84 out of 30, p=0.52). From the results of the test, we can know that participants were in a relatively low proficiency level, and they had similar proficiency level.

Learning Materials

All the materials used in this study were authentic English business documents provided by Dolphin International Trade Company in Guangdong (see appendix for one document). The reason for choosing these materials was that success in task-based language teaching is evaluated and associated with real-life language use (Skehan, 1996). In addition, the students are from business English major, they may be interested in learning business documents.

Target words

The target words were 30 verbs selected from these business documents (suspend, encumber, stipulate, construe, recapture, claim, unfetter, rotate, release, comply, discharge, negotiate, guarantee, reimburse, inspect, obtain, remit, correspond, revolve, revoke, reverse, accompany, indorse, transfer, procure, undertake, infringe, defer, indemnify, authorize). The
reason to choose verbs is that verbs were found to be difficult items in comprehending business documents.

**Task Design**

The three tasks in this study were all involved with translation of authentic work documents:

Task 1: Translate work report

Task 2: Translate the work report plus fill-in

Task 3: Translate the work report plus sentence writing

In Task 1, participants were provided with English business documents. The 30 words were highlighted in bold print. The task of participants was to read the documents and translate into Chinese. Need was moderate (learning was imposed by the task), search and evaluation were absent (they were not required to refer to the dictionary or write). Thus, the involvement load index for this task was one (1+0+0=1).

In Task 2, participants were provided with English business documents as participants who received Task 1. However, the bold-faced target items in task 1 were deleted from the documents and substituted with blank spaces numbered 1-30. The 30 target words were reprinted in alphabetical order on a separate paper. Each target word was provided with a brief Chinese explanation. The participants were required to fill in the blanks with words from the list. Afterwards, participants translated the documents into Chinese. As in Task 1, need was also moderate in Task 2 (learning was imposed by the task), search was absent (target words and explanation were provided), evaluation was moderate (participants had to distinguish the given words). Its involvement load was two (1+0+1=2).

In Task 3, participants finished the requirements as participants who received Task 2. In addition, they were given 30 minutes to review the same list of words as participants received in Task 2 and then create original sentences using the target words. Similar to Task 1 and 2, need was also moderate in Task 3 (learning was imposed by the task), and search is absent (target words and explanation were provided). Evaluation was strong because they had to create original sentences using target words and previously known words. Thus its involvement load was three (1+0+2=3).
Measurement tools

Three tests were designed for measuring the vocabulary gains and retention. The tests were administered three times: pre-study, immediate post-study, and two months after the study. In order to preempt potential ordering effects, the tests administered at three times were identical except for the order in which the items were presented. The measurement tools were explained in details as follows, and to avoid previous test effects on the subsequent test, the order of the three tests was a-b-c.

a. Passive recognition test

Knowledge of word form was measured with a multiple-choice recognition test. This receptive test format was considered appropriate because it measured participants’ recognition of basic word forms. Previous incidental learning studies which included multiple-choice recognition test have generally used distracters that are quite similar in form (e.g., Pe’llicer-Sanchez and Schmitt, 2010; Webb, 2007). The current study also used this measure, one of the examples are as follows:

A. Propoze  B. propose  C propise  D propese  E. I am not sure

Participants need to choose the correct form. To avoid wild guesses, an I am not sure option was also provided. Participants were encouraged to choose this option if they were not sure of these word forms.

In this test, word forms that were chosen incorrectly were given a zero point. Correct answers of target words received one point. The maximum score for this test is 30 points.

b. Active recall test

Measurement of active forms of target words in the current study was adapted from the parallel version test (version 2) of Vocabulary levels test in Schmitt, et al. (2001). Validation of this test was showed in Schmitt (2010).

Participants were provided the 30 test items with Chinese and English definition on a separate page and were required to write down the target words. For example,

建议(suggest) P___
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The first letter of the target word was given to ensure that they would not provide an alternative, but correct word (e.g., recommend instead of propose).

In this test, words answered incorrectly were given a zero point. Correct answer received one point. The maximum score for this test is also 30 points.

c. Free production test

In this test, participants were provided with the 30 test items on a separate paper, and were required to write any passages on any topics that they are interested in. They were told that when they use a target word correctly, they would get one point. No half point was given in the current study. The maximum score for this test is also 30 points.

Procedure

Instructions on how to finish this experiment and a consent form were given to the students one week before the study. All participants in the three experimental groups were told that three tests would be given to them before and after the tasks. Although Hulstijn (2003) argued that it would be intentional learning when being told the arrangement of tests, the contents of the two vocabulary tests were hidden from them in the current study. Methodologically, it is still incidental learning.

The experiments were carried out during regular class time in their course of business translation. The 60 participants were randomly assigned to one of the three tasks, with 20 participants in each task. However, directions on fulfilling the tasks were provided before the experiment. Teacher would not provide any formal instruction during the experimental process, the tasks needed to be completed at their own pace. Due to the fact that time on doing the tasks varies, participants who finished the task earlier were told to wait for others. In translating one document, Tasks 1, 2, and 3 took approximately 30, 40, 60 minutes to complete, respectively. There were ten business documents, which mean that the experiment lasts for 10 weeks. Two months after the experiment, they were required to take the measurement tests again to measure their retention of target words. During the two months, they were not provided with the related business documents.
Results and Discussion

Table I presents the scores of the three tests administered at three times: pre-study, immediate post-study, two months post study.

Table I. Mean scores and standard deviations for the three tests administered at different time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Pre-study</th>
<th>Immediate</th>
<th>Delayed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive recognition</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.70</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>23.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.05</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>26.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active word recall</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>13.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>20.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task3</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>20.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Max=30

According to the descriptive statistics in Table 1, participants entered this experiment with some knowledge of target words. If we consider the participants’ improvement in scores at the end of the study to reflect their learning of target words, the results appear to indicate that incidental learning of these target words did take place. Participants in Task 3 outperformed the participants in Task 2 in recognizing receptive word form, recalling word meaning, and producing sentences. In addition, performance in Task 2 was higher than that in Task 1. Performance in retention was also higher in Task 3, followed by Task 2, and Task 1.

Scores on the three tests were respectively submitted to a two-way mixed ANOVA with task (Task 1, Task 2, Task 3) as the between-subjects factor and time (pre-study, immediate, delayed) as the within-subjects factor.
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The results revealed that participants did not have a significantly different pre-study performance in the three tests ($P>0.001$).

In the test of passive word form recognition, a significant task effect $[F(1, 84) = 21.50; p < .001; \eta^2 = .22]$, and a significant time effect $[F(1, 85) = 25.09; p < .001; \eta^2 = .23]$ occurred, and no task and time interaction. Post-hoc turkey analysis on the scores of immediate test revealed that Task 3 was higher than that in the Task 2, which, in turn, was higher than that in Task 1 ($P<0.001$). Post hoc Turkey’s analysis on the scores of delayed tests also indicated Task 3 were significantly larger than that of Task 2, and Task 2 was also significantly higher than Task 1 ($P<0.001$).

In the test of active recall, a significant task effect $[F(1, 94) = 18.50; p < .001; \eta^2 = .19]$, and a significant time effect $[F(2, 04) = 14.50; p < .001; \eta^2 = .15]$ also occurred, and no task and time interaction. Post hoc Tukey’s analysis indicated the mean scores of Task 3 were significantly larger than that of Task 2, and the mean score of Task 2 was significantly larger than the mean score of Task 1 ($P<0.001$). The ANOVA conducted on the scores of the delayed posttest also revealed that Task 3 were significantly larger than that of Task 2, which, in turn, higher than that of Task 1 ($P<0.001$).

In the test of free production, a significant task effect $[F(1, 67) = 17.50; p < .001; \eta^2 = .21]$, and a significant time effect $[F(2, 76) = 15.50; p < .001; \eta^2 = .29]$ also occurred, and no task and time interaction. Post hoc Tukey’s analysis on the scores of the immediate test and delayed test both indicated that Task 3 were significantly larger than that of Task 2, and Task 2 was significantly larger than Task 1 ($P<0.001$).

In summary, the research findings supported the two research questions. The predictions of Involvement Load Hypothesis generalized to the low-proficiency learners in recognizing word form, recalling meaning, producing sentences through translation tasks. Task effects on differential gains in retention were also in line with the prediction of ILH. Put succinctly, in the present study, EFL low-proficiency level learners who completed Task 3 performed remarkably better than learners who completed Task 2, which, in turn, also better than learners who completed in Task 1.

**Pedagogical implications**

The results of this study purported that the *evaluation* component of
involvement is crucial to word learning. The task of translation plus sentence writing (strong evaluation) and the task of translation plus fill-in exercises (moderate evaluation) resulted in significantly greater gains in recognizing, recalling and producing word knowledge compared to the translation-only task (no evaluation). The present study is also in line with previous studies that compared tasks with varying degrees of evaluation (e.g., Keating, 2008; Laufer, 2003; Teng, 2014; Webb, 2005), which showed that using target words productively in original contexts is more beneficial for learners to master unknown words. For example, in Laufer’s (2003) study, to achieve significant lexical acquisition, reading supplemented with a focus-on-form component was found to be superior to reading-only task. Similar results were also found in Laufer (2005). Therefore, armed with the above knowledge, learners need to be guided into elaborate processing of previous learned or known words. For this, the present study suggests that task supplemented with word-focused activities that require high degrees of evaluation is beneficial for learners to elaborately process words, which in turn, improve their learning of unknown words.

Another implication is that this study highlights the fact that, overall, a task with high involvement load is beneficial for learners. For example, language learners in an EFL context who are attending English classes will generally take reading courses, listening courses, and translation courses. However, learners will still find themselves held back down by their lexical barriers even after a significant amount of time spent on these courses. Comprehension of written texts and spoken input is contingent upon knowing 98% of the words (Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010), which is a knowledge of 8,000 word families (Nation, 2006). This is a threshold that most instructed learners in EFL context fall shy of (Keating, 2008). I do not argue against the importance of reading, listening, and translation courses. I argue that additional form-focused component be supplemented in teaching those courses, especially for those students who have a lack of a sufficient vocabulary threshold for language output. For this, I recommend Nation’s (2001; 2008) method of four strands, wherein teaching involves meaning-focused input for listening and reading practice, meaning-focused output for speaking and writing, deliberate teaching by using rich vocabulary instruction and effective strategies to raise students’ word consciousness, and developing fluency with words by making connections with already known words. For the learners, they are responsible for using the words through practical tasks. The teacher’s main job involves contriving effective tasks with high involvement load that can compensate for the relatively limited amount of exposure that is characteristic of EFL
A final implication to be drawn from the current study is that it is essential for learners to rehearse newly-learnt words, especially for their productive word knowledge. This was because two months after the study, it was found out that participants decreased the most in productive word knowledge. Even Task 3, which led to the greatest gains in learning of productive word knowledge immediately after experiment, also suffered the greatest decrease in gains over the two-month period. For example, teacher can curb precipitous declines in word retention by recycling vocabulary frequently via tasks with high involvement load, or deliberately instruct the learning of target words frequently after tasks. For example, in previous studies (Folse, 2005; Keating, 2008), importance of rehearsal during instruction was also proposed.

Conclusion

The present study extends empirical support for the construct of task-induced involvement in three translation tasks. This study also proposes that low-proficiency EFL learners benefit from translation tasks with more involvement load. In other words, tasks with higher involvement load lead to greater gains in recognizing, recalling, and producing word knowledge.

As Nation (1978, 2001) pointed out, there are disadvantages of using translation as a way of teaching the meaning of vocabulary, but by cautious use of translation in vocabulary teaching, many of the drawbacks can be averted. Translation is one essential way of familiarizing with the meanings of vocabulary words.

In addition, based on the results of this study, it is suggested that form-focused component be incorporated as one of the core points in teaching English courses for EFL context. It is also suggested that when conducting vocabulary teaching, efforts must be paid to the three construct components of ILH, especially the strong acts of evaluation. In other words, students need to have opportunities to evaluate more on differences between words, then use target words productively in original contexts. Form-focused components as well as Nation’s (2008) four strands are highly suggested in making translation tasks more effective.
Limitations

First, test-retest effects might occur, part of the improvements might be due to familiarity with the tests. Thus, more in-depth research design on ILH for learners in the future would also be beneficial, e.g., learner variables should be taken into consideration. In addition, a mixed method on researching IHL is warranted. For example, whether differential gains in word learning would still hold or not when task completion time was taken into account (Keating, 2008).

References


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Language Testing, 18, 55–88.


**Shipper**
FOSHAN DOLPHIN TRADING CO., LTD.
RM.1413, YONGFENG BUILDING 12# TONGJI XI RD. FOSHAN,
GUANGDONG PROVINCE, CHINA
TEL: +86 757 83302897 FAX: +86 757 83302890

**Consignee:**
MALFORD CERAMICS PTE LTD
629 ALJUNIED ROAD #06-12 CITITECH INDUSTRIAL BUILDING SINGAPORE 389838

**Notify Party:**
SAME AS CONSIGNEE

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**Place of Delivery**

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| CAIU3029530/20’GP/YMLT697110 |

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SAVINO DEL BENE (S) PTE LTD 43, CHANGI SOUTH AVE 2 SINGAPORE 486164
TEL: 65 62211600 FAX: 6562240789/63234183 AS AGENT FOR THE CARRIER YML